

What cultural differences do Syrian refugees experience when studying in Europe?

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Bachelor's Thesis
DP for Multilingual Management
Assistants
April 2018





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Degree programme Multilingual Management Assistants	
Report/thesis title What cultural differences do Syrian refugees experience when studying in Europe?	Number of pages and appendix pages 31 + 1
<p>Today in 2018, we are facing the biggest refugee crisis since the Second World War. Millions of refugees have fled their homes due to the war in Syria and came to seek asylum in Europe. They have risked their lives to cross the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe. The majority of asylum seekers chose to stay in Germany, Sweden, Netherlands etc. Background information on why they chose these particular countries and the number of refugees in each country is presented.</p> <p>Many decided to either continue or start new studies in Europe. The education systems between Europe and Syria are quite different and it wasn't easy for refugees to adjust overnight. It is important for people working with refugees, to have an idea of the struggles they are going through.</p> <p>The objective of this thesis is to present from a refugee's point of view, the culture differences they experiences when coming to Euope. Not only differences in education, but also in everyday life.</p> <p>A research was conducted interviewing refugee students studying in different countries in Europe. Each person explained the culture differences they went through and how they feel about coming to Europe. The results are presented in a summarized form.</p>	
Keywords Culture differences, Refugees, Education Systems, Intercommunication, Cross-culture difference	

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1 Introduction

Since the war began in Syria in March 2011, Europe has received a very large number of Syrian refugees seeking asylum. It has been one of the top topics in the news for the past seven years. Europe has not had a refugee crisis this big since the Second World War. Many asylum seekers risked their lives crossing the Mediterranean Sea and crossing Europe country to country, in hopes of finding a new safer future. This was an opportunity for the Syrians to come to Europe, a continent they heard so much about, to study, find a good job and to raise their children in a better environment.

Europe has always been a dream of many Syrians, but it wasn't easy for a Syrian to move to Europe. Now they received the opportunity to come to Europe, but sadly there had to be a war in order for them to be able to come.

Since arriving to Europe and being offered a place to live in and money to live off, many are yet very depressed and are suffering an enormous culture shock. Many are having a hard time adjusting to a new culture, a new system, a new way of living and finally a new education system.

A very large number of the Syrian refugees who came to Europe, were young adults aged 16-30. The majority had to leave their studies without finishing them, while others didn't get the chance to start. But when they arrived in Europe, they got a second chance to study. They received the opportunity to study in the best universities of Europe. Education systems and schools in Syria are quite different than in Europe. The way of teaching and interaction between students and teachers is also different.

1.1 Objective of the research

The main objective of this thesis is to raise awareness about how Syrian refugee students have come a long way to reach Europe and what cultural differences they are going through. The goal is to show the difference between education systems in three European countries (Germany, Sweden and Spain) and Syria.

By interviewing and talking with Syrian refugees who live in different European countries and are studying in different fields, I can share what it has been like to switch from studying in Syria to studying in Europe from their point of view.

The goal of this research is to answer the following questions:

- How different is European education from Syrian education?
- What cultural differences do Syrian refugees experience when moving to Europe?
- How do you ensure effective communication with someone from a completely foreign culture?

1.2 Structure of the thesis

The first part of the thesis describes the Syrian crisis in general and what led the refugees into Europe. The reason why Syrian refugees chose to come and seek asylum in certain countries and what are the statistics in each country.

The second part is about cross – culture differences between the Middle East and Europe. In order to talk about cultural differences in education, it is important to have an idea about the difference between the cultures in general and what is the way of communication in each culture.

The third part of the thesis is the comparison between the Syrian and European education. Three different European countries (Germany, Sweden and Spain) are chosen from North, Central and South Europe, in order to show the diversity of educations in Europe. The basic structure of the education systems in these countries is explained.

The fourth part consist of explaining the research part itself of how it was conducted. How the interview questions were created and what led the researcher into choosing this topic. What was the inspiration behind this topic.

Finally, the last part of the thesis is the results of the interviews conducted. The results are presented in a summary, followed by the conclusion of the research. To top it off, recommendations on how refugees could make adjusting a little easier and what people who work with refugees, should take into consideration.

A self – evaluation is given in the end to express the researcher's thoughts throughout the thesis process. And an evaluation of what the researcher has succeeded.

2 Background (Why refugees flee to Europe)

Millions of refugees crossed into Europe since the war in Syria started in March 2011. This has been the largest refugee movement of people coming to seek refuge in Europe since the end of World War II (Migration Policy Institute MPI, 2018).

After most of the big cities in Syria such as Aleppo, were destroyed, people had no place to live. Their houses had been completely destructed leaving nothing but ruins. These people had no choice but to leave their homes. They decided to come to Europe in hopes of finding a better future for themselves and their children. In the Middle Eastern countries, Europe has always been seen as a continent of opportunities, freedom of speech, high education and health care. Most importantly it is seen as a place where an unemployed person will be taken care of along with their family. Many Syrians had family members in Europe, so they decided it is the best place to go to.

Many people risked their lives crossing oceans and walking for days from country to country with a better future in mind. Unfortunately, many lost their lives trying to reach that goal. In the beginning of 2017, an estimated 2 700 people have either died or gone missing on their way to Europe while crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

“We have not seen a refugee outflow escalate at such a frightening rate since the Rwandan genocide almost 20 years ago”, says UN refugee chief Antonio Guterres in a public briefing to the Security Council (BBC News, 2013).

2.1 Why the certain countries in Europe?

Many Syrian refugees sought asylum in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey but were only put in camps and were living in poor situations. Disease had spread, and they were at risk of dying from malnutrition.

Lebanon was overcrowded with refugees from its neighbouring country Syria. According to the website www.syrianrefugees.eu, by April 2014, 1 million refugees were living in Lebanon, which mean almost 1 in 5 people in Lebanon is a Syrian refugee. In July 2014, Syria's neighbouring countries had accepted over 3 million refugees while Europe only accepted 100 000. By 2015, Jordan had closed its borders and Hungary built a 30km long fence at its border preventing Syrian refugees from entering (Syrian Refugees, 2018).

Many European countries opened their doors to Syrian refugees and let them seek asylum. In August 2015, Germany suspended the 1990 protocol by letting refugees seek asylum even if they had tried in another country before coming to Germany (Independent, 2015).

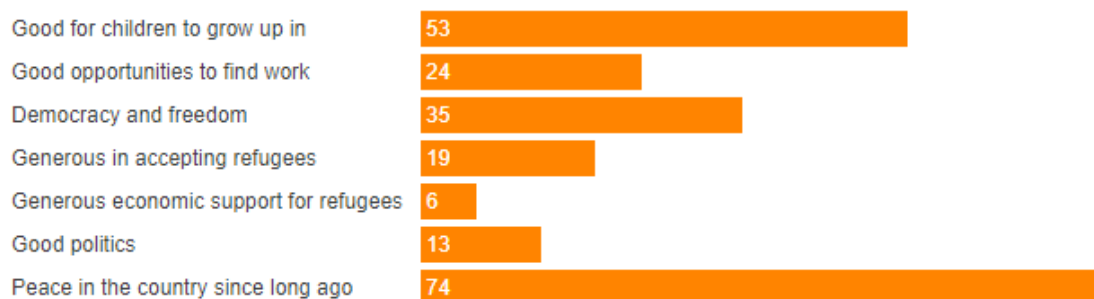
Most of the refugees chose the country to stay in based on what they have heard from other people who have sought asylum and also based on where they have relatives. The majority of refugees who were able to reach Europe through the Mediterranean Sea and Balkan countries, sought asylum in Germany, Italy, France, Sweden and The Netherlands.

Germany is the number one country with Syrian refugees. Not only did the refugees come to Germany to be reunited with their families, but also because Germany has much more job opportunities for refugees. Many refugees have qualifications that companies need and are given job opportunities. Germany has a very high reputation among Syrian people, and finally they had the opportunity to come and start a new life there.

Many who saw that Germany was not what they wanted, they carried on to The Netherlands. In 2016, amongst them were especially married people, because Germany does not offer family reunification for spouses from March 2016 until July 2018 (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees Germany, 2018).

A research conducted by Sweden Research, discovered that 74% out of 400 asylum seekers, chose to come to Sweden because of its peace. They see it as one of the safest countries and a perfect place to raise their children and have them educated.

Why do asylum seekers come to Sweden?



Figures in percentages

Source: [Sweden Research](#) [Get the data](#)

Created with [Datawrapper](#)



Figure 1. Data from Sweden Research (The Local, 2016)

2.2 Refugee statistics (by country)

Due to Chancellor Angela Merkel's welcoming to the refugees, in 2016, Germany took in the most asylum applicants that was 745 155.

Italy and France received the largest amount of asylum applicants after Germany with 122 960 and 84 270 (Telegraph, 2017).

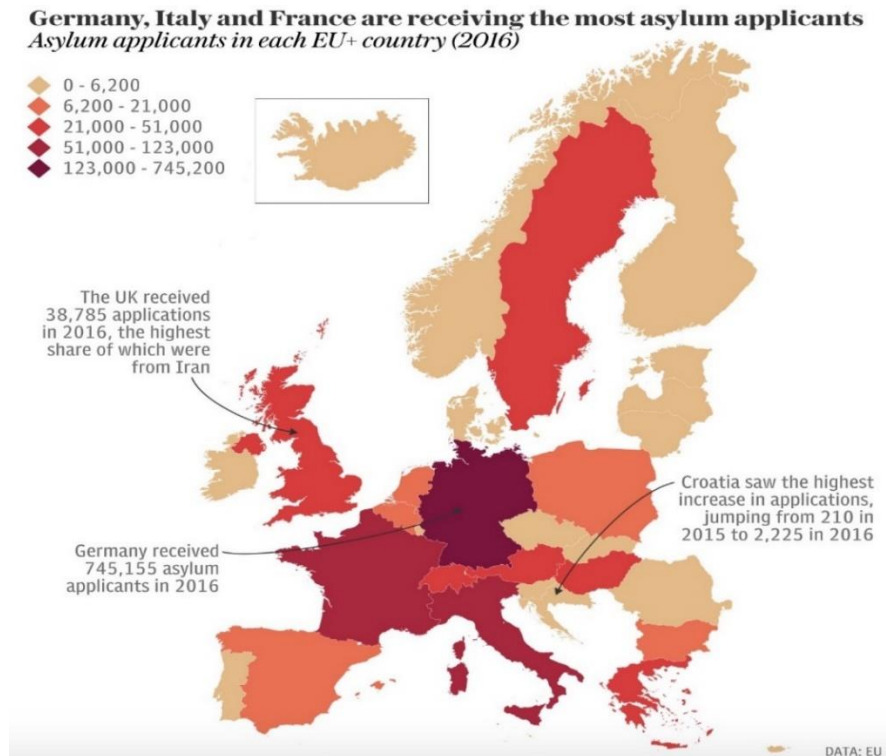


Figure 2. Statistics of asylum applicants by country in 2016
(Telegraph, 2017)

Even though many refugees sought asylum in Europe, not everyone was granted a refugee status. In 2016, Germany granted 3,171 refugee statuses for every million inhabitants. The United Kingdom granted 130 for every million inhabitants.

Germany is the most generous EU country to refugees

Total asylum applicants and number of those granted refugee status, per million inhabitants of each EU country (2016)

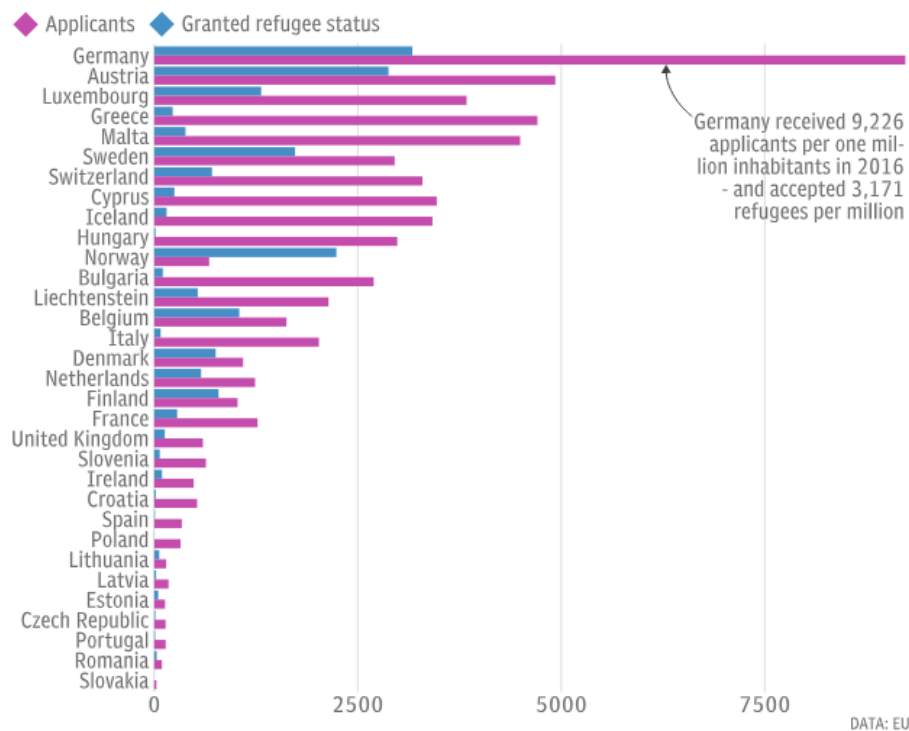


Figure 3 Number of asylum applicants that were granted refugee status in each country, 2016 (Telegraph, 2017)

Total 2014	Total 2015	Country of citizenship	2015												Total
			Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	
11.595	27.710	Syrian Arab Republic	725	515	555	647	1.161	1.680	2.271	3.837	5.259	6.439	3.076	1.545	27.710
4.100	8.434	Eritrea	88	47	112	405	1.115	1.289	1.056	1.397	922	1.210	417	376	8.434
3.045	4.942	Stateless	134	119	111	119	269	303	452	615	855	1.019	587	359	4.942
1.570	3.450	Iraq	107	89	64	58	48	78	108	199	431	1.092	720	456	3.450
977	2.945	Afghanistan	92	79	70	81	83	74	97	159	184	473	910	643	2.945
746	2.074	Iran (Islamic Republic of)	52	62	37	36	42	45	58	81	113	425	735	388	2.074
89	1.016	Albania	8	17	10	13	26	40	71	79	173	285	145	149	1.016
1.527	866	Somalia	97	103	72	54	51	54	71	65	74	75	82	68	866
271	764	Ukraine	25	41	42	49	52	77	50	64	42	108	107	107	764
60	689	Kosovo / UNSCR 1244	7	21	5	20	64	162	112	107	53	58	29	51	689
5.911	5.990	Others	428	444	469	410	457	500	443	477	488	691	632	551	5.990
29.891	58.880	Total	1.763	1.537	1.547	1.892	3.368	4.302	4.789	7.080	8.594	11.875	7.440	4.693	58.880

Figure 4. Number of refugees entering The Netherlands monthly in 2015. Along with refugees other than Syrians (Refugees in the Netherlands. IND Asylum Trends)

By the end of 2015, The Netherlands had accepted 27 710 Syrian refugees. The number had doubled since the year before in 2014 (Refugees in The Netherlands, 2017)

3 Cross culture differences between the Middle East and Europe

When we research what cultural differences Syrian refugees experience when coming to study in Europe, we must take a look at the general cross – cultural differences between the Middle East and Europe.

When we compare the general cross-cultural differences between the Middle Eastern and European countries, we would have a very long list. The differences appear in the way of greeting, behaviour while conversating, conversation topics, business etiquette, concept of time, relationships, just to name a few.

Some cultures are very affected by religion, while others are not. The difference in politics also changes details in a country's culture.

A concept introduced by American anthropologist Edward T. Hall in his *book Beyond Culture*, 1976, explains that cultures can be divided into two different categories, high – context and low – context culture. Most European countries fall into the low – context category, while Arab cultures fall into the high – context category. (Hall 1976, 91)

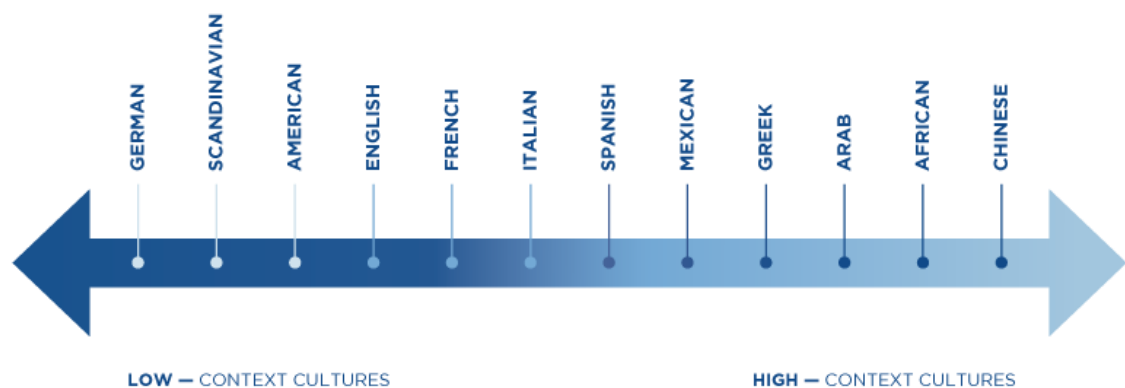


Figure 5. A metric developed by anthropologist Edward T. Hall. (Hall 1976, 91; Southern University, 2016)

Misunderstanding while communicating with different cultures is very common. Some people who are not familiar with how a certain country communicates, might be offended due to misunderstanding.

To give an example, there was a telephone call between a German and a Saudi Arabian. In Germany, it is normal after a telephone call to write down everything in writing and send it to the other participant of the phone call. For a Saudi Arabian, if decisions are made verbally, that would be enough for them, especially if there is a bit of a relationship. When the

German put everything they discussed in writing and sent it to the Saudi Arabian, that showed the Saudi Arabian that the German does not trust him (Meyer, 2014).

No country is completely considered high – context or low – context. All cultures contain something of each. Some cultures are both high and low.

3.1 High – context culture

Countries that are considered as high – context cultures, are Arab, African, Asian, Latin American and some Central European cultures.

In their way of communication, they tend to use gestures, facial expressions and different tones of voice. Their communication relies greatly on nonverbal cues. Words are not as important as the situation and nonverbal elements. High – context cultures tend to have fewer rules and structure. (Southern University, 2016)

Large groups of people such as, family, friends and work, are all part of their identity. Their relationships depend on trust and last for a long time. Communication is indirect and other people's feelings are taken into consideration. Tensions and uncomfortable situations are avoided by indirect communication. (Joyce 2012, 1; Southern University, 2016)

Their concept of time is not as strict as low – context countries. People could suddenly pop up at your unannounced for a cup of coffee. Being fifteen minutes late is not seen as disrespectful or irresponsible.

People tend to stand close to each other and greetings are with contacts, such as hugs, air kisses on the cheek and handshakes.

Problem solving, and learning is preferred in groups and by observing others.

In business, it might be difficult for an outsider to enter a high – context culture, because they don't have the internal information, especially since relationships in a high – context culture, aren't instantly created.

3.2 Low – Context culture

Countries that belong to low – context cultures are usually Western Europe, Australia and USA.

Information is exchanged more directly, and the use of nonverbal cues are not relied on. Background information is provided in order to avoid misunderstandings. Rules and structure are both very important. Communication is direct and clear. Written information is important, and contracts tend to be longer. (Communicaid, 2010)

Appointments need to be scheduled before hand and being on time is quite important. Time is valued and being on time shows that you respect the other's time they have taken out to meet with you.

In business, relationships tend to be more of a short term, because the only goal is to accomplish the task. (Southern University, 2016)

Personal space and privacy are important to an individual. Closeness is more enjoyed with close family members.

3.3 Direct and indirect communication

Many countries tend to be more direct and blunt. They go straight to the point and say what they think. This is very common in low – context cultures. Especially when giving feedback in school or at work.

In countries like France, a child's homework is grade more harshly or honestly than, for example the United States of America. In USA, if a child gets the wrong answer, their paper could be graded "Almost there!" or "Better luck next time!", while in France it would say "Skills not acquired". This could put a person into low self - esteem if they are not used to this way of honest grading.

Americans are trained to wrap positive messages around negative ones, while the French are used to criticizing passionately and providing positive feedback sparingly (Meyer, 2015).

Indirect communication is all about nonverbal cues and circling around what you are really trying to say. "no" is an avoided answer and replaced with "maybe". They say less than what they meant to say. It is important for the listener to understand this way of communication and it is their responsibility to interpret the message. (Joyce 2012, 1)

Syria falls under the category of high – context culture. When arriving to Europe, the majority of the countries that accepted Syrian refugees, are low – context culture. May Syrians felt offended at times with the directness and honesty of the German, Swedish and Dutch.

In a low – context culture, it is all about being clear and simple. They tend to repeat what they are saying to ensure you have received the clear message. It is also taken into consideration that the other participant, does not have the same information. Therefore, they speak as if the other participant is receiving new information.

In high – context cultures, it is the other way around. It is expected that we have the shared amount of information. (Meyer, 2015)

This could often lead to misunderstanding especially among Europeans and Middle Eastern. When a European speaks this way with a middle eastern, the middle eastern tends to interpret that he/she is being spoken to as a child, or that he/she is seen as not smart.

4 Comparing education systems between Syria and Europe

When comparing studies between Syria and Europe, grade levels and qualifications aren't the only things being compared, but also ideology. What ideologies are being taught in schools and who is responsible of everything taught in schools. Even the material and school books that are being used for educating has a very important role in the countries education.

4.1 Education in Syria

After the World War I, Syria was colonized by France and did not gain independency until 1946. In 1958, Syria, along with Egypt, joined the United Arab Republic. This came to an end when in 1961, the Ba'ath Party took power and has been in power ever since. (Nafsa, 2016; Nuffic, 2015)

This is important to know when we talk about the education system in Syria, because politics have a large impact on education in Syria.

The government has a very large role supervising and controlling the education in Syria. Both the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Higher Education are in charge of both primary and higher education in Syria. (Study Country, 2018)

Syria's education system is completely controlled by the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party. The primary and elementary schools in Syria are taught with Baathist ideology (Socialism) and Pan-Arabism, which stands for that all Arab Nations, from the Atlantic Ocean (North and West Africa) to the Arabian Sea, are unified. (Arabic Encyclopedia, 2017)

Syrian education is according to an old French educating system. School was compulsory from 1-6 grade until 2002 when it became compulsory until 9th grade. 9th grade is one of the hardest levels for students, and many suffer from anxiety and a great level of stress due to fear of failing.

- 1 – 6 grade is primary school and it is divided into two halves:
 - o *Halaka oula* (first ring), which is 1 – 4 grade and
 - o *Halaka thania* (second ring), which is 5 – 6 grade.
- 7 – 9 grade is lower secondary school *ta'elim 'edadi*
- 10 – 12 grade is upper secondary school *ta'elim thanawi*, which is considered as high school. (Nuffic, 2015)

During 9th grade, final exams are held nationally at the same time. It is one of the most difficult grades in secondary school. After 9th grade, based on their results from the national

exams, students have two different kinds of schools to choose from: "General" academic studies or technical studies (industrial, trade, or IT). "General" secondary school is the best option, because after finishing 12th grade, students can choose whatever they wish to study. If they choose to study in one of the technical secondary schools, they must continue in that same field after 12th grade. Usually, students with low grades enter one of these three schools. During 11th grade, a student is given the opportunity to choose which branch they want to study in; literature or science. (Study Country, 2018)

The last year of upper secondary school (12th grade, which is also known as the baccalaureate), the national exams are taken all over Syria, at the same time. This is the hardest stage of studies for a Syrian student and it contains courses of very high level. These studies prepare students for higher education and are the entrance requirements for universities. Students in the "general" studies receive a diploma called *Al Shahada Al Thanawiya Al Amma* (Baccalaureate) and those who study in the technical school receive the diploma *Al Shahada Al Thanawiya Al Fanniya* (Technical Baccalaureate). Technical Baccalaureate is eligible for institutes, but if the student has high enough grades, they could be considered for university studies in the same field they studied in. (Nafsa, 2016)

With the results of the baccalaureate exams, students choose what university and specialization they want to study, by applying through a complicated system called *Mufadaleh*. The *mufadaleh* system is a problem in the Syrian education system, because it sometimes keeps the student from studying what they actually wish to study. For each level of the baccalaureate results, there is a limited amount of studies to choose from. Without the required grade, a student cannot apply for study they wish. There are no entrance exams for universities. Being accepted into university depends only on your baccalaureate results. (Interviewee: Zakko, March 2018)

4.2 Education in Europe

Europe consists of 44 different countries. Each country has its own culture, language, politics and education system. Even when some countries are really close to each other, they still have different education systems.

I have decided to introduce three different European countries that have different education systems. I chose one country from Northern Europe (Sweden), one country from Western Europe (Germany), and finally one from Southern Europe (Spain). I also took into account that these three countries have the largest amount of Syrian refugees in their part of Europe.

4.2.1 Germany

Germany has a unified education system, but the education system differs from one federal state to another. The 16 federal states (Länder) each have their own education department and policy. They also have their own autonomy in education and legislation concerning it. (UK – German Connection, 2018)

All of Germany go to the same type of elementary school (known as *Grundschule*) and it is compulsory. Children must start school at the age of six and the studies last for nine years. From grades 1 - 4 (in some states it is 1 - 6), they are taught the same subjects.

After 4th grade, children separate to different secondary schools that fit the according to their academic abilities. There are three different secondary schools: *Hauptschule*, *Realschule* and *Gymnasium*. Teachers give recommendations to students during elementary schools, as to where they could apply, but the parents usually have the final word in deciding where their child will attend secondary school. (How to Germany, 2018)

The difference between the three secondary schools is based on the subjects and also way of studying. Some are of lower secondary and other of upper secondary levels.

Hauptschule (grade 5-9) teaches the same subjects as *Realschule* and *Gymnasium* at a slower pace and focuses more on vocational studies. Its purpose is to prepare students to work life. At the end of the studies, students enter vocational training and are allowed to work in a public sector. (UK – German Connection, 2018)

Realschule (grade 5-10) gives a broader general education along with vocational-oriented studies. It is considered to be of higher level than *Hauptschule*. Nowadays, it is possible during the last year for students to switch to *Gymnasium*. This is the case for students with a high academic achievement. By the end of *Realschule*, students finish off with the final examination called *Mittlere Reife*, which gives them the possibility to access studies that prepare them for university. (UK – German Connection, 2018)

Gymnasium studies qualify the students for a higher education, such as universities, and gives them the *Abitur* diploma. (UK – German Connection, 2018)

Germany offers special education to special needs children as well. There are two different special needs schools (*Sonderschule* and *Förderschule*) for students to attend depending on each student's needs and the availability of the schools. (How to Germany, 2018)

Higher education usually lasts up to six years, but there have been new changes in the curriculum where the bachelor's degree is obtained after four years.

Home schooling is against the law in Germany as it is seen to prevent children from their rights to be in other children's company and adults other than their parents. Also, parents cannot deny their children from receiving sexual education, because it is seen as a right to information for the child. Many families seek asylum abroad in order to be allowed to home school their children. (Treehugger, 2018)

When it comes to religion, there are no compulsions to pray with the school prayers or attend religious services. It is against the law, as the state and church are separated in Germany. Since 1995, the Christian cross was not allowed in the classroom if someone objects to it. Otherwise, it is seen as a violation against religious freedom for the non-Christian students. (The Local, 2010)

When a foreigner, such as a Syrian refugee, wants to apply to a university in Germany, they must prove their level of education. In order to enter a university in Germany, a student must hold an *Abitur* diploma that is achieved in *Gymnasium*. If they do not have this diploma, another way of achieving a diploma of an equivalent level is possible through a one-year course *Studienkolleg*, which is considered as equivalent to *Abitur*. (Studienkollegs, 2017)

4.2.2 Sweden

The Swedish parliament (Riksdag) and the government are responsible of creating the framework and principles of the education. Each school's principle is in charge of the school's activities.

Sweden not only concentrates on education, but also on democracy and human rights in school. They believe in equality between, race, genders, religion and most importantly the well-being of children. Already, at an early age of 1, children are sent to preschool (*förskola*) where they begin learning by playing and exploring. In Nordic countries like Swe-

den, playing is seen as a very important stage in a child's development. Preschool is voluntary and must be offered in all municipalities for children at the age of 1. (Swedish School for New Arrivals, 2018)

Once they turn 7, they must attend compulsory comprehensive school (grundskola), which is grade 1 – 9. During 7th grade, students are given the choice to choose what language aside from Swedish and English, they would like to study (French, German, Spanish). They are also given elective crafting lessons such as woodcraft and sewing. After 9th grade, students choose to either continue with studies that prepare them for higher education by entering upper secondary studies (Gymnasieskola), or vocational studies. Both types of studies last three years. (Swedish School for New Arrivals, 2018)

Upper secondary school is divided into 18 different programs, each with a different educational focus. It is also divided into two different branches: "social science" (samhällsvetenskap) and "natural sciences" (naturvetenskap). When it comes to vocational studies, students must include 15 weeks of work in their three - year studies. After preparatory and vocational studies, students can apply to a higher education of any choice. Some universities require entrance exams.

There are five different introductory programs for students who were not able to graduate upper secondary schools. These five programs are not equivalent to upper secondary school, but they can continue with a national programme. (Skolverket, 2017)

Special needs children have a comprehensive school especially for them, and if they do not have access to a special needs school, they will be provided with special needs care at normal schools. (Swedish School for New Arrivals, 2018)

It is seen important for the parents to be up to date on their children's education progress and what they are being taught in school. Every school term, the parents meet with the teacher to discuss their child's progress and struggles.

4.2.3 Spain

Spain's education system is controlled by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, but most of the decisions concerning the education system and supervision of the staff is made by the 17 autonomous communities of Spain.

Spain has a large amount of private schools. Some are state funded, and some are not. The private schools vary from Catholic schools to foreign schools.

Education is compulsory and free from ages 6 – 16. Even though the education in Spain is free, in some regions parents must pay for school books, sometimes uniforms and other school material. (Don Quijote, 2018)

Preschool from age three to six is also free and recommended. It helps children to develop, learn how to communicate and by the end of preschool, children will know the alphabet. (Expatica, 2015)

Primary (*Primaria*) and middle school (*Educación secundaria obligatoria*) are together the basic education grades 1 – 8. After 8th grade, students may continue towards high school (*bachillerato*) or vocational studies (*Ciclos Formativos*). The secondary school system follows the British comprehensive system but is less strict and less disciplined. (Expatica, 2015)

A high school diploma is required for entering universities along with an entrance exam (*Prueba de Acceso de la Universidad*). The entrance exam's result and the student high school grades together are looked at and based on the result, a student is accepted into university and told which degrees they may pursue. (Don Quijote, 2018)

Catholic religion lessons are not obligatory in schools. Parents may choose whether they want their children to attend these lessons.

Home schooling is not illegal, but it is not common in Spain. There is an organisation (Asociación para la Libre Educación) that helps those who wish to home school their children. (Expatica, 2015)

Students are assessed regularly to see if they are achieving the level they are supposed to in that year. If they are seen as lacking behind, they are held back and must repeat the grade they are in. Each grade cannot be repeated more than twice. (Expatica, 2015)

5 Conducting the research

The inspiration behind this research is simply the empathy I felt towards the Syrian refugees that have come a long way to reach Europe and start a new life. Being a Syrian immigrant myself, I have an idea of what it is like living in a foreign country. A number of my relatives have come to Europe, during the Syrian crisis and are currently suffering from culture shock and difficulty adjusting to a new way of living, governmental system and education system.

The idea of researching Syrian refugees studying in Europe came to me when I was searching for a thesis topic. I stopped to think, what do I know most about and what resources do I have in order to conduct such a research. I realized, that I am surrounded by young Syrian refugees who are currently studying in Europe.

After receiving all the results, I combined their answers and analysed what similarities were experienced. The majority had similar answers.

5.1 Research method for conducting the interviews

Since the refugees chosen to be interviewed all live in different countries and there was difficulty on agreeing on a time to sit down and interview them, a written interview through email was conducted instead. A Word document with eighteen questions (see appendix 1) was sent to fifteen people and seven of them replied.

Along with the interviews, I had conversations with refugees almost daily about the struggles and challenges they are going through. I myself, live with a refugee, which has given me an advantage of experiencing the daily life they go through and I was able to observe the positive and the negative they experience on a daily basis.

5.2 Trustworthiness of the results

Though some of the interviewees did not reply with their answers, it was clear to me based on all the other answers that they have a similar way of thinking. Almost all felt the same way when moving to Europe and went through the same struggles.

I would have wanted more specific answers to my questions, but I noticed that many of my questions were possible to answer with a “yes” or “no”. Having discussions with refugees, even some who live in the United States of America and Australia, supported the answers I received in the interviews.

I expected to receive a long list of differences in education, but all the interviewees gave the exact same answer, which was the differences with the communication and interaction between the students and teachers.

6 Summarized research results

All the interviewees fled Syria because of the war. Some had dreamt of coming to Europe before the war, while others never thought of leaving. 90% of the interviewees are young male students aged between 20 and 30 years. All of the interviewees, whose answers will be presented, were students in the university and a couple had just finished their high school studies. They are studying in the field of economics, engineering and English literature. The majority have a passion for art and the mindset of a new generation. The war affected them deeply as they were in a sensitive time of their lives, in the midst of building their future.

In the eyes of the young Syrian students, Europe has always been seen as a democratic continent where there is freedom of speech. Europe is filled with opportunities to study a high education and establish a great future. Many got these assumptions from the media, movies and most of all from people who lived in Europe that visited Syria. Europeans are considered very organized and sophisticated. Education systems and governmental systems are organized and highly developed.

"I pictured it as perfect continent with perfect countries that have very high education and probably 1000 times better than what we have and wide opportunities to study and earn money." (Zakko, March 2018)

Technology is at its best. Europeans have all the basic needs such as food, clean water and electricity. Most importantly Europe is safe, and everyone lives in peace.

"I expected Europe as a democratic country with free society, high technology, a lot of skyscrapers, and that I'd have European friends quickly." (Chabo, March 2018)

At the beginning of their arrival to Europe, many experienced a culture shock, and some went into depression. Europe was almost exactly as they imagined, but not culturally. It was clean and cold but there was hope for a better future. The worst part was, being far away from home and their loved ones. People were less social than Syrians.

When thinking about studying in Europe, many had the idea that studying in Europe is intimidating and that it would be difficult to study and get accepted into the universities. But it turned out to be much easier than expected. University studies in Syria are more intense and students are under a lot of pressure.

Many had to be held back in studies due to their language skills; they needed to provide language certificates or spend a year or two going to school just for language lessons. Those with a diploma from Syria or who were just about to finish their studies in Syria,

needed to have their grades and diploma evaluated to see if it was equivalent or enough to study in Europe. Some had to repeat 1 – 2 years of study in order to have the required subjects. It was frustrating for many who thought they had already been done with a certain phase and needed to repeat it again.

Most of the cultural differences they experienced were timing, difference in food and eating. In Europe, people are more on time and arriving to appointments on time. This is not that common in Syria except in business meetings. In Syria, more time is spent socializing and working less. Food has been very different for Syrians, especially when lunch and dinner is held.

What was different the most was Europeans way of thinking and open-mindedness. So many topics that are inappropriate or could lead to fights, are acceptable in Europe and everyone speaks their mind openly. Topics such as politics, religion, sexual orientation and life are not openly discussed in Syria. As one of the interviewees explained, "I was surprised to see how everything in Europe is acceptable such as atheism, homosexuality, unmarried couples living together etc. in Syria, these topics are very sensitive and unacceptable in society." (Zakko, March 2018)

European people seemed to be very straightforward and direct while in Syria, you avoid saying things directly at the person and hurting their feelings.

The majority of the students adjusted easily to these new differences, while some are still struggling. One of the interviewees mentioned that he has been in The Netherlands for 5 years now and still comes across new things that surprise him and has a hard time adjusting. (Shernisha, March 2018)

When it comes to discussing the difference in education, the differences experienced the most are the amount of workload and pressure, way of teaching and the teacher's role. In Syria there is more pressure to succeed and the amount of school work is large. In Europe, they concentrate more on research and self-study while in Syria you are dependent on the teacher and the given school books. As one of the students explained: "In Syria, the teacher is essential. In Europe, the internet is above the book and the book is above the teacher." (Bakary, March 2018)

It is easier to interact with the teachers in Europe and students can freely express their opinions and everyone's opinion is accepted. Students are given a right to speak while in Syria it is much harder to be open about your thoughts on a subject. It is hard to negotiate with teachers if you have, for example, missed a deadline, etc.

Interacting with different people from different cultures was easy for all once they passed the language barrier. Language was the most difficult thing to pass in order to be able to adjust to their new lifestyle with the natives of the country and also foreigners. Life got easier once they were able to communicate and interact with the natives.

All of the students preferred studying in Europe than Syria, but many do wish they could take what they learned and gained while studying in Europe, to Syria and put it into good use.

7 Conclusions and recommendations

While moving to Europe has been a mixture of emotions and struggle, it has been a blessing to many. They got the opportunity to study and begin a new life. I could say all the students are very happy with their current situation, but many still long for seeing their home and all their friends and relatives. They still long for the life they had before.

It has been a struggle to adjust to new changes and culture. Some adjusted quickly, while others still have a hard time.

I have come to the conclusions that if one keeps on thinking about their previous life in their home country and keeps on thinking how much better life was there, it will be harder for them to move forward. Many did the mistake and kept on thinking this way. They made life in Europe worse and ruined the opportunity to make living in Europe positive. They kept on thinking negatively and were not able to move forward.

A person must try to like and enjoy the country they live in no matter where they are and benefit from the opportunities they are given. I know many people who have lived in a foreign country for many years and still haven't learned to speak the language. Others learned the language in the first years they moved and are now studying in universities.

Every country has its positives and negatives. A perfect country does not exist. But you can choose to make the best of it and enjoy your new home.

The education systems between Europe and Syria have their differences especially when it comes to the interaction and communication between the students and teachers. In Europe there is more freedom of speech and the students have a voice and a right to express their opinions. This is what the Syrian refugees cherished the most about studying in Europe. They feel like they matter, and their opinions are heard.

Basic things like studies in math, physics and chemistry are taught differently in Syria than in Europe.

To those who work with refugees, should keep in mind that they have left everything they loved and new behind and came to a completely new country and are starting a new life they don't know anything about. These people who interact with refugees need to keep in mind that it is hard for the refugees to adjust. The natives should be patient and try to understand their struggles. Try to encourage them and not give up on them. If you see that a refugee is lost and does not know what to do with their life, try to help them find their way and explain to them what opportunities they have. When it is a new country, they could spend years trying to look for something they do not see is right in front of them.

When interacting with a refugee student, it is important to make them feel at home and not show them that they are being treated a certain way because they are refugees. Making them feel at home shows them that they are accepted, and they really do have a future in Europe.

8 Self – evaluation

This was the first time I have written a report this long. It was challenging for me at first, but once I started to dig deeper, it got easier. At first, trying to structure the thesis was very overwhelming. I had to divide it into different parts until I was able to see the vision of my thesis more clearly. It was difficult and very time consuming in the beginning, trying to collect information from all over the internet.

This thesis has taught me how to research for a topic and use the results. It increased my interest in researching and writing.

The topic of this thesis is close to my heart and I feel an obligation to my people and country to share their struggles and to show it from their point of view. I have always had information about this topic, but I have never put it into research.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview questions sent out to the Interviewees by Email.

- Name
 - Age
 - Gender
 - Location
-
1. Was it your dream to come and study in Europe or were you obligated to?
 2. How did you picture Europe? What did you expect it to be like?
 3. Where did you get these expectations of Europe from? Did you visit? Movies? Relatives?
 4. What was your first impression when you first arrived in Europe?
 5. How did you picture studies in Europe?
 6. Was it hard for you to be accepted into a university here?
 7. After starting your studies, how did you see it compared to your previous studies in Syria?
 8. How are the teachers different in Europe than in Syria?
 9. Are they more serious here? More honest? Corrupted?
 10. What do you think of the education system in Europe?
 11. What were the cultural differences (between the European country you live in and Syria) you first experienced?
 12. How did you adjust with these differences? Did it take long?
 13. After living and studying here for a while, do you think about continuing your life here and using your degree?
 14. Do you wish to take the positives of Europe to Syria and put it into use?
 15. How many cultures did you see here?
 16. Was it hard to interact with people from different countries?
 17. What was the hardest thing you experienced when studying in Europe?
 18. Where would you have preferred to study? Europe or Syria?